

OLD BLACK BASS

ALBERT BENJAMIN
CUNNINGHAM

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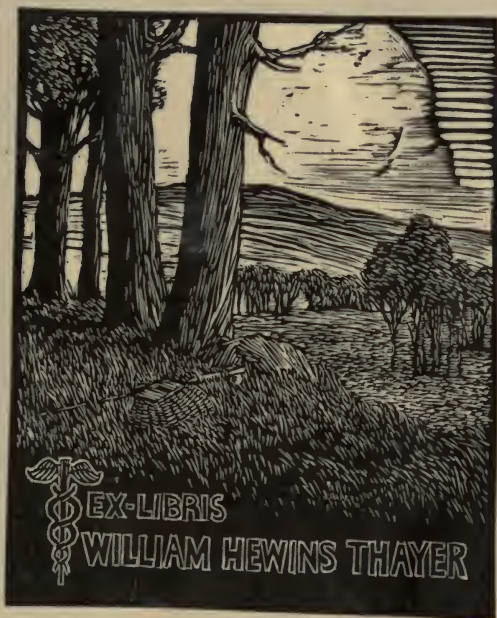
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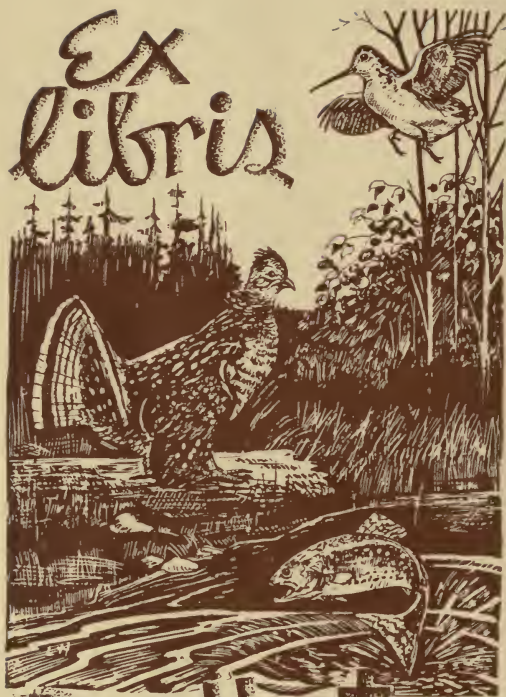
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*Shower fish meets
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THE CHRONICLE OF AN OLD TOWN

OLD BLACK BASS



ALBERT BENJAMIN
CUNNINGHAM



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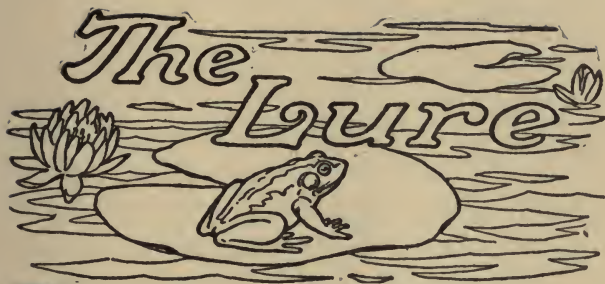
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I AM the spirit of the fisherman. I sit by the riverside and hear the splash of trout in the gray morning. I go to the lake at evening and see the bass flash under the sweeping bough of the birch. I dream my dreams of fish.

I enter the city office when the breath of May blows warm and whisper to those who love me of white falls and quiet waters in the vastness of open spaces.

I hover over the campfire where my kindred are gathered and listen to their tales of great catches, of unnamed winding rivers, of fish that fight in waters that are cold.

I am as old as the River Nile, where the ancient Pharos cast their lines among the

rushes; I am as young as the barefoot boy hurrying across the meadow with his paw-paw pole.

I have my loves and my hates. No words can record my aversion for the person (is he man or devil?) who snares the little fish under size, whose abortive selfishness leads him to continue when the creel is full and who catches the mother at spawning time. To me he is the human wolverine, the fish glutton; and for him I have loathing as well as hate.

But there is another who angles for love—love of the blue-green softness of lake, love of cold hurrying waters, love of the camp-fire below the pines. He matches his ingenuity with the cleverness of fish, and gives them a chance. He knows when he has caught enough, and he is tender with the little ones. To him I would dedicate this tale.

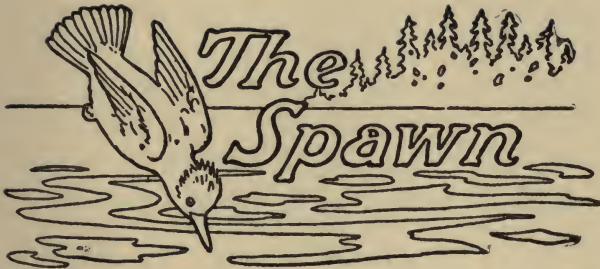
In it I shall tell of Old Black Bass as I have seen him on dusky evenings where the whippoorwill calls.

Old Black Bass was the leader of his school. He was big of body, aggressive of spirit, and bold. With him was cleverness

in eluding the canniest angler, and his life knew both sorrow and joy, love and bitterness.

If the reading of his story leads you to greater love of the waters, to a better understanding of all his kindred, and to manifest forever the attitude of the true sportsman, then I, the spirit of the fisherman, shall be satisfied.

I



THE moon was first a luminous crescent etched sharply against the soft blue of the sky. Then it came full and round and threw a silver mantle like a sheer bridal veil over the placid waters of the lake. It waned with the nights to a pale shadow, one side sheared away. Finally it vanished, and darkness was over the waters.

During the major part of its phases, as it waxed and waned, a black bass in the mouth of a quiet cove had kept a long racial vigil. Fifteen yards from shore, she had guarded her spawn bed with a vigilance absolute and ceaseless. Tired she grew, yes; but neglectful, never. She was one of

the mothers of the world, paying in this watchfulness her travail for the life so soon to be.

She was a large-mouth. And while slender of form, she was agile and strong. Her speed as she darted at an approaching enemy was as the swiftness of light; yet as she hung above the nest in the quiet hours with slight movement save the gentle undulation of pectoral and pelvic fins, she was a daughter of the Graces, beautifully formed.

Many times during those days of vigil a great bass slipped from his position as outer guard fifteen feet away and approached her with friendliness and respect. Where she was slender he was mighty; while she was gentle he was pugnacious and aggressive; where she was light of color he was excessively dark. But when they came together it was on a plane of equality, for the eggs on the nest she had deposited and he had fertilized; they should be the parents of the spawn.

Seeing the two together on the occasions when he hung over the nest with her, one knew that the spawn from this union should



"Male and female kept racial vigil over the nest."

be the product of nature's choicest selection, for she on her side and he on his were typical of the best of the species.

It was on a memorable morning twenty-two days after the eggs were deposited that the spawn began to hatch. Little tiny chubs one fourth of an inch long were in the water where days before the mother had kept watch over stillness; small wee bits of protoplasm that expressed in random reflex movement the life that had been given to them.

Four days passed. As morning advanced the little minnows rose nearer the surface and were warmed; at evening they settled back on the nest. The mother kept up a circling guard, going round and round the school.

Slowly the tiny sac disappeared from their bodies. They came clean; their birth process was over. Then for the first time the mother bass showed signs of restlessness. It was as if, her task nearly finished, she fretted to be free: just as the collie, the sheep corralled, yawns her boredom and whimpers for the distant places.

She watched the inchoate movements of

the tiny progeny with more and more a turning of her body toward the still cold waters of the lake. Within her was the deep and formless call of nature, to be away.

More with imperious movements of the body than by any conscious guidance the parent directed her tiny offspring toward the shore. They did not follow; they were swept along by the swirling currents created by her activity.

They moved toward the base of the cove. Arriving there, she circled the spot slowly, again watchful and alert, inspecting for dangers the new quarters.

No sooner was her tail turned than the little followers lifted to the warmer surface water. A belted kingfisher dropped from a tamarack and with whir of wings struck the water. Its aim was true, and the family was lessened by three.

The mother bass whirled and reflexively darted for the deep; then came back trembling to the terrified school. For a moment the fret to be away was swallowed up in the old maternal solicitude.

But for a moment only. She huddled the little ones together, then hung motionless

above them. Suddenly she looked tired. There was noticeable now a leanness of body, a weariness about the heavy cartilage of her mouth. Her eyes were spent. Through them she surveyed the little ones, and sadly, as though the moment of farewell occasioned a wordless regret. Anxiety was there too, as if she hesitated to leave them unprotected in a life so full of peril.

A minute passed, while mother surveyed her tiny spawn. Then a soft wind moved on the face of the waters. Tiny wavelets riffled the surface and broke in soft cadence on the pebbly shore.

It was a call, a signal to the cool feeding grounds. From the mother bass the droop disappeared, weariness vanished. She seemed to knit together with a growing energy. She lifted nearer the surface, swung about and headed out. The opening and closing of gills, a flash of the supple caudal fin, and she was gone.

She had said farewell, leaving her little ones to grow and develop according to the form and purpose determined for them by nature, the great mother of us all.

II



THE family of tiny bass was to make its home in the cove. Nor was ever a mansion built for the residence of man more beautiful than this sheltered recess.

Lone Pine Lake is itself worthy of fullest acquaintance. It is a lake of the high mountains, formed partly by nature, aided by a three-foot dyke of man's building at the outlet, and fed by a blue stream from the north.

This dyke of man's making accounts for many of the fascinating surprises of the lake. Before it was built, some of what is now water was then sloping meadow,

crossed and criscrossed by broad stone fences. Now, these ribs of stone run far into the lake, wonderful as home of rock bass, splendid means whereby the angler may wade to deeper water, and magic reefs for white waves in a high wind.

Surrounding the entire body of water are the trees: slender tamaracks lifting like artists' brushes dipped in pale green paint on the broad canvas of the sky; white birches with boles eight and ten inches in diameter, and smooth as the throat of a swan; oaks with the omnipresent sprouts about their bases; and beech, their branches sweeping low.

The water rises slightly in winter and falls in summer, so that at fishing time there is a rim around the lake bare of foliage, and covered here with great black bowlders, there with pebbles and sand.

The lake itself changes with the whim of the day. Of early morning it lies still and warm, a white fog playing yard high over the surface. As the sun touches it the mist vanishes and the waters lie in the embrace of light like a green park close-mown.

Mid-afternoon finds the breezes playing

over the surface, sending soft waves to lap the shore, catching up ripples far out and causing them to leap and fall like tiny whitecaps.

Water-bugs form in groups near the shore and swim indolently, their black glossy backs like ebony buttons on a plush table. Water Striders hop awkwardly about, and the Ephemerid flies low over the water.

Of evening there is about the whole lake the mysterious air of life. Gnats drop into the water to be snapped up by smaller fry. From 'way up in the river inlet the bullfrog croaks a hoarse mating call. Trees cast a darkening shadow, then none at all. The hum of insects is in the air. A luckless moth drops down, and instantly there is a swirl of water and the open mouth of a great bass. A long pickerel, tapering as an Indian bow, leaps up and disappears, leaving scarcely a ripple behind.

It was on this lake, and in a cove of it, that the mother bass, her spawning over, left her family. The bottom here tapered gently to the shore. A great boulder, half out of water and near the bank, provided crannies and a cool shade. A small white

birch grew low, and its branches hung partly over the water.

For a few days the school of tiny bass did little more than wriggle in the water. They partook of no food. It was as if there was that within them that sustained life and impelled growth without sustenance. Even as a grain of wheat placed in water seems to have life within it that, coupled with the nourishment it receives from the water, will enable it to sprout and reach a certain growth, so the tiny bass seemed to develop from within save as the water sustained them.

Then faint hunger pangs quickened them and they fed, now on minute crustacea to be found on the bottom, now on insect larvæ that drifted through the water, and occasionally on the small insects that fell upon the surface.

For three months their history is a record en masse. They lived together in a group no one member of which was particularly set apart from the others. Seen from above, the school resembled the shadow of a fragile shawl thrown on the surface of the water. Of individuation, whereby one became

marked or distinguished from the other, there was none. They were a single family, and their home was the common water.

Yet even in this early period some mysterious selective agency seemed interfering with life. Without apparent cause, many turned their bellies up and died. They rose to the top and floated there, tiny white bodies an inch long, with big heads and slight crimson slits at the under gills. Nature had rejected these as unfit.

Others fared differently. When the lake was unusually rough and the waves swept shoreward, they were carried to the land. They could not stem the inward current; and once cast ashore they could not flap back down. They were accordingly left to die, far up on the dry. It was the price nature exacted for their weakness.

Twice havoc was wrought in another and more tragic manner. On a memorable afternoon a great black shape slipped through the water and bore down on the school. He swam aggressively, and struck with the speed of wind. When his great jaws closed five of the little school slid down his wide gullet.

He hung for a moment, alert for sight of others, then jerked about and continued on his way. The spirit that broods over the waters saw his raid and smiled: he was the father of the school, and had fed on his own young.

Six days after this something else happened. It was an occurrence to start reflection over the accomplishment of maturity; to cause one to think that all nature is against the young, and that the few who survive and reach adulthood have achieved a signal victory not vouchsafed to the many.

A second bass swam into the cove, paler of color than the first, and more slender. She bore the markings of the female, for she was the mother of the spawn.

With sure confidence she charged the school. Some leaped clear of the water in their convulsive terror to escape. Others darted for the protection of the friendly boulder, to hang trembling in its crevices. But a few were less nimble. For their inability to escape they paid the forfeit that sooner or later nature ever exacts from all of her children less fitted than others to sur-

vive: they reposed as food in the very body where four months before they had lain as eggs ready for the spawn.

Nor was this heartless; it is merely nature's way. With the bass there is no such organ as memory in the sense in which we understand the term. The bass has no cortex, and the cortex is the brain center in which our memories are stored.

With the fish memory is physiological. In the presence of external stimuli they are roused to anger or lulled to contentment or stirred to regard. But when the external factors are removed they do not recall the state produced by them, as men do. In joy man recalls his sorrow; in joy the bass merely and only experiences joy.

Man's mind expresses itself in three directions: toward the past, which is memory; toward the present, which is realization; and toward the future, which is anticipation. With the bass there is only the present.

So in this case. When the pressure of her eggs led the mother bass to deposit them, the action called forth in her the whole series of movements connected with the

maternal process. She prepared and protected her nest, and guarded the young four days, but when she bade them farewell the set of instincts called out by the natal processes vanished with her going.

Maternity over, she was again the bold feeder. In the presence of her own young she now felt only the hunger call. Memory of them she had none; so on them she fed and was satisfied.¹

So it was with this school, that in the midst of life there was always death. Nature eliminated the unfit. Sometimes by disease from within, or by waves from without; or, again, by the foraging of carnivori, the school was cut down.

But always some escaped. Nature kills, but nature makes provision for life. While some perished others thrived. And through the very activity expended in escaping death they developed a greater hardihood than had their lives been an existence of security. They fought to live, and the fighting made them fit to live.

So passed five months. And at the end

¹For a fuller discussion of the psychology of fish, the reader is referred to the admirable article in *The Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution*, 1899, pp. 377ff.

the family was not a mass struggling collectively; it was an aggregate of individuals, each expressive both of the native tendencies born with his organism and of the scars he had received in his own life struggles.

Because of this individuation the family may no longer be considered *en masse*, but separately, each as playing his distinct role in the great act we call life.

III



FISH are not named at the beginning of life, as people are. When they finally are, the name is not a word, but an attitude. A fish's name to other fish is the mental impression they have of him, inarticulate but real.

Leaper is the name of one of the fish of our school, not because he is so addressed by the others, but because the dominant thought of him is that he leaps through and out of the water more gracefully than any other member of the family.

Had they been possessed of words, as we are, they would have named him accordingly. Lacking these, they simply had the

thought without the word symbol for it. But because this is a tale for men, human symbols must be used to indicate the fishes' thought.

At the age of five months Old Black Bass was the largest member of his school. From tip to tip he measured six and one half inches. Furthermore he displayed a rugged hardihood that made him appear more mature and formidable than his fellows.

He was on this morning occupying his favorite place by the great bowlder and just beneath the overhanging bough of the birch. The spot was favored by him, since the bowlder provided protection and the bough many luscious morsels; and it was possessed by him because his size enabled him to get what he should want.

The day was warm. On the bank beyond the bowlder sounds of laughter punctuated the awkward efforts of a little baby learning to walk. The little fellow toddled toward the shore line and with a great show of effort tossed a golden orange into the water.

Revolving round and round, it floated gayly out to the big rock. Old Black Bass

sank deeper to avoid any possible danger, then rose tentatively for closer inspection.

The orange seemed harmless. He even punched it with his nose, looking ridiculously serious the while. Behind him and beneath there was a great rush: the entire school was advancing to explore.

Leaper the Delightful, always frolicsome and gay, darted upward and with swirl of tail spun the sphere round and round. He darted beyond it and returned; leaped clear of the water and encircled it, his small body flashing in the sun.

It became a game. Nick-fin struck from beneath and the orange bobbed up and down. Even little Sidie, who had not been acting just right of late, joined in the sport. And, seeing her coming, Leaper cleared the way for her so she might have a free chance clear of the others.

The little fellows were sportive. They leaped clear of the water and came down panting but thrilled. They churned the surface to a tiny turmoil at which they grew excited and fled only to return again.

The game then took on the nature of a training. For just as among humans play

is often a preparation for life where the girl with her dolls learns the art of motherhood and the boy with his gun the knack of defense, so now the play became a preparation for later life.

They struck at the orange. From all angles they darted for it, measuring distance, calculating velocity, and ever striving for accuracy. All except Old Black Bass.

When the play first began he subsided and drew apart. From his vantage he watched with what amounted to downright disdain the caperings of his brothers and sisters. Only once did he seem pleased—when Leaper struck wild.

It was not until Gloria struck that the thing seemed to grow personal with him. But when she advanced, missed, and returned in some confusion, he darted imperiously out.

He had a way of attracting attention, for at five months he was a grandstander. Now all retired to give him room. And he struck. He struck with uncommon precision and strength, sending the orange whirling a full foot. He turned, cast a veiled glance at Gloria, and swam away.

Then tragedy stalked in. Near the bottom of the boulder was an oblong cavity where stone and earth failed to meet. It formed a blind tunnel seven inches high and four wide in along the side of the rock.

This tunnel was eschewed by all, yet all were itchyly curious about it, for the fish is possessed of a constant curiosity. So when all were together and one started to enter it, there was such a storm of disapproval as to keep him out.

But when the game started about the orange White Belly slunk away, circled the boulder, came again in sight of the others and finding himself unobserved, slipped into the cave.

It was wonderful within. The boulder on the right was slick and black; the earth to the left smooth and cool. It was a relief from the heat without. He went clear to the end and turned. The entrance a yard away showed blue and beautiful.

He decided to remain a while. He flapped his tail, and in the narrow confines the water swirled about him. He did this again and again, then rested, thinking of the triumph he should achieve on his return

to the school. There should be a major rush to the cave when he should tell; but nothing could take from him the distinction of having been first to enter and explore.

His tail was to the entrance now, but he knew when the small opening was darkened. He whirled quickly, sudden unaccountable alarm rushing over him.

In the entrance was a turtle; a small, ugly, fiery-eyed little reptile that was regarding him intently, its expression made hideous by the underthrust of its lower jaw.

White Belly was palpitant with terror. This object he had always feared, not so much because he had learned to fear it, but because he was born afraid of it, as man is of a snake. His small bivalvular heart throbbed with his terror.

The turtle's look became cunning. Its beady eyes glowed with satisfaction. It poised itself like a hand placed over the entrance, its neck thrust forward, its short front legs keeping it in position.

With a violent propulsive movement of his tail White Belly scudded swiftly for a momentary opening between the reptile's head and left fore foot.



"The bass was terrified at sight of this traditional enemy."

But quick as he was the turtle was swifter. Its toothless beak fell like a hammer and stopped the rush, sending the little bass shuddering backward.

The shock halted him, and for a moment he delayed; but not the turtle. It was quick to seize its advantage, and paddled cannily up the tunnel. Like a pugilist pressed on before he recovers from a blow, White Belly tried desperately to recover and evade the oncoming foe. He hurried the two feet to the end of the channel in a wild blind effort; turned and darted swiftly from side to side as if to unsettle his antagonist's purpose.

But on it came. A swift-moving leg seemed unexpectedly right under the fish. A sharp black claw caught at the left gills and tore them. A blood vessel broke, and the water carried a dark stain.

He was but five months old. The average life of a bass is eight years and that of man forty. So comparatively White Belly was the age of a two and a half year old child. He was no match in cleverness or strength for this traditional enemy.

The loss of blood both weakened and

terrified him. He turned partly on his side, tried desperately to right himself and flee, but could not. The round shape became more confident. A long stringy neck covered with dark loose skin extended, and on it the horny head. The mouth opened, showing red and toothless.

It closed just back of the bass's dorsal. He made a last struggle, wriggling as one with tail held stationary, but he did it without hope.

Outside the cave the sport with the orange had been broken up by another and more novel diversion. The churning of the water caused by the sport had caught the attention of one with the picnicking party who had brought his tackle along.

Something more wonderful than the orange was now in the water though it did not float as the orange floated. It appeared to be a little fish like themselves, only it fell on the water far out and then swam zigzag fashion for the shore. It did this many times.

All the little bass were curious about this strange sight; but Leaper especially was tantalized beyond endurance. Especially as

the funny little minnow raked above his head and started for the shore, did he feel an irrepressible urge to follow it—like a cat that simply must chase the vanishing ball.

He made a quick strike; but as most of his play practice had been with stationary objects, he missed. But undismayed he leaped clear of the water and rejoined his comrades.

Hump Back, so called because while the backs of the others arched but slightly his was pronouncedly convex, saw Leaper's effort and himself resolved to try.

On the next appearance of the object he struck. His aim was true, but his subsequent actions were peculiar. Instead of returning, he followed his strike to the shore and disappeared.

An interval of silence. Then a disappointed voice on the shore which the fish did not hear or hearing would not have understood, spoke its irritation.

"Darn! Undersize!"

"Goin' to throw 'im back?" another voice queried.

"Yes. Not worth scalin'."

He tore the hook from the fragile mouth, held the little bass up, and as a man would strike a handball, batted him back into the water.

He turned over and over, then lay gasping. The cartilage of his mouth was torn, but this gave him no pain. The pain he felt was in his side. Where the hand had struck him the scales were ruffled and broken, causing dull irritation. The water did not slip from him here, but clung to his skin and fretted him. His companions swam nearer and looked at him curiously, but understood not—save one.

The next day the pain was more acute. The reason was that poison in the water had searched out the wound and infected it. A red abrasion appeared, the scales dropping away.

Vainly he tried to escape. He swam against small stones to remove it; whipped his small tail to shake it off. But it grew worse. It spread. The pain and the hectic activity wore him down.

The third day he swam nearer and nearer the surface. He turned belly up, and at times gulped air through his gills. But he

was conquered. On the fourth day he was still.

Only Sidie had understood his struggle, and she but partly. From the fourth month she had not been well. Something within her gave way then, and she found great difficulty in swimming erect. In spite of her efforts she would turn partly on her side.

None knew the effort she made to overcome this. But when she saw Hump Back, her own malady enabled her to comprehend something of his struggles. Near him the last day she tried to learn something of his mishap, but got only the impression that somewhere on the shore had been an enemy more terrible than all others.

It was then that the spirit which broods over the waters smiled in cynicism, for he knew that the creature which among men is called "highest" may be the greatest enemy of the fish. For while the turtle kills for food, this "highest" often mangles and kills needlessly and through his own irritation.

If you should ever visit Lone Pine Lake, you will find there anglers you would be

glad to know. But a grumbler often fishes there, whose plaint is the growing scarcity of fish. He is the man who caused the death of Hump Back; and what he did to Hump Back he has done to many others.

IV



THE development of Old Black Bass that first year illustrates the law that to him that hath shall be given and from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.

By some queer quirk of physical heredity he had entered into the inheritance of a body destined to make him a fish among ten thousand. Already his proportions were exceptional. His body was richly dark with the glow of unimpaired health. The maxillary of his large mouth swept back well behind the eye, and made his strike for food deadly sure. His thick, flat back was ribbed with nine sharp spines, and be-

hind them the thirteen rays flared in a graceful arch. Ten rows of glossy scales were on his cheek and sixty-eight adown the smooth lateral line of his body. When he moved through the water it was with the precision of a highly complex but wonderfully efficient machine.

True he was awkward, for the bass is seldom a graceful fish, but in his very awkwardness was suggestion of smoldering strength, like the awkward but sleeping muscularity of the untamed lumberjack.

And having this body through inheritance, more accrued to him as a result of it. The best feeding grounds about the cove he took by right of prowess. While the others were limited in their range, his untiring energy enabled him to forage farther and longer than they, and therefore fare better. His strike at swimming luckless frogs was speedier and more sure; and when many made for the same morsel, his strength let him crowd the others away and gobble it down.

Consequently, he seldom went hungry. While the youthful appetites of the others

often were unappeased, his maw was ever full. He grew faster than they, not alone because he was born to a greater size but also because the abundance of his food added new tissue to his frame.

But, as so often happens to the one who finds himself able to overcome all obstacles and triumph over his kind, his very successes proved elements in his failure. By saving his life he was in a fair way to lose it.

Always inclined to feel superior, he became arrogant with his victories. He grew domineering. Imperiously he slashed his brothers and sisters, intolerant of their weakness and contemptuous of their helplessness to each other. Yet with all his imperiousness the same was true of him as of men with similar dispositions: he was insatiable in his desire for flattery and adulation. He wanted to be admired, feared, praised, deferred to, respected, acclaimed.

There were in the school some who were willing to accord him all these, just as among men there are always kotowers to the supercilious. But others were less deferential. Especially Leaper. Genial

and social, a good loser as well as a generous victor, he embodied that fine combination of ambition and sociality so admirable in the human realm. To him further had been vouchsafed a mild and subtle sense of humor that played gayly over the whole of life.

Old Black Bass struck violently at a particle fallen into the water, and came down shaking from his jaws the empty shell of a locust blown from afar on the wind. His mortification at this lack of judgment was so manifest that Leaper could not refrain from opening and closing his mouth in lugubrious imitation.

A ripple of amusement passed over the school. To check it at the very outset Old Black Bass whirled belligerently, and many subsided quickly. But Leaper knew no fear. With another dolorous opening and closing of his mouth he held his place. Conflict was imminent when Gloria slipped between them and flashed her shapely body through the air. But though this was diversion, the entire school sensed that here was enmity that should never die.

Old Black Bass knew then that in the

school might be found here and there an attitude toward him not of admiration; and brooding alone that evening he chewed the cud of his mortification and found it bitter. But, like many of his type among the higher vertebrates, he concluded that the needed thing was a more complete showing of his prowess, and so bided his time.

Then a change came over nature, slight at first but more apparent with the hurrying days. Out on the shore the tamaracks lost their luscious green and aged; leaves of the birch fell and skimmed like frail canoes over the water; oak leaves turned brown and rattled in the biting wind.

It was the approach of winter. Noticeable first in the lake was the absence of food. No longer did the breeze come freighted with its burden of insects. Gnats ceased to fall. Only little frogs, green and tender, hung in the water's edge. In the shallows it was cold.

One day Old Black Bass was nosing close in when a tiny snake descried him and wriggled frantically for the shore. But the rush of the carnivore was too swift. Knotted into a ball the little reptile felt the

crunch of sharp teeth and slid down through warm darkness.

Water grew colder. But the fish were not dismayed. For with a knowledge that came to them from out the far past they knew that this was in the order of nature. Just as geese honk wedge-shaped to the South with changing wind, so the bass moved toward the deep.

Gregarious they were, as is the prairie dog or the beaver; and this instinct kept the school together. Far out in the water was a break in the wide wall of a great stone fence, and here they made their winter quarters.

Then began an ordeal of endurance which nature must have considered her Great Eliminator. Just as with men civil service examinations are held to weed out the less capable and select the most efficient for placement, so nature would use winter on the school of bass to eliminate the weak and select those of greatest hardihood to perpetuate the species.

Sidie was the first to go. The ailment which had not been severe enough to eliminate her when the water was warm and the

food plentiful, soon put her out of the race in this new environment. And closely following her went five more. Even Leaper felt the pinch of the first month.

But not Old Black Bass. His solitary disposition often sent him to forage alone. His strength, furthermore, enabled him to go farther than the others, enlarging the diameter of his feeding-ground.

On a day he made a discovery. Following a stone fence in search of food, he saw in a cranny a small sunfish. A voice from within told him he should be but mildly interested here, but the hunger urge silenced the voice.

He bore down. The little fish should have slipped farther back into the protection of the stones, but its fear blurred its instinct. It darted out and circled, trusting to its swiftness. But with mouth open and sharp teeth bare, the carnivore conquered. The sharp spines of the little fish caused a stabbing pain in his stomach, but the comforting bulk meant more. He swam back to his companions with unruffled complacency.

Leaper and Gloria were together, and the

sight angered him. He rushed Leaper and by superior strength drove him away. Then he returned to Gloria and she slipped up to him, extending her mouth till it touched his side. He hung in contentment, fanning the water with pectoral and pelvic fins.

The black bass can accommodate himself to a wide range of water variation. He will live with ice above him, and thrive when the temperature of his medium is 100 degrees Fahrenheit. So now: It was not the water so much that troubled the school; it was hunger.

Hunger broods irritation; irritation, conflict. If Swarthy had been a human, he would have aspired to be a gunman; and doubtless Fusser would have enriched the ranks of the reformers. For while Swarthy was sullen and direct in his disposition and method, Fusser was forever trying to arrange things. Her advice as to foraging was copious and inaccurate; her "I-told-you-so's" were ceaseless.

In the hunger and confinement this ubiquitous meddling infuriated Swarthy. A few weeks back he had been either too

busy to notice it, or too satisfied to take it seriously. But now everything was magnified. Differences became mountainous; idiosyncrasies, insulting.

The school was moving slowly and aimlessly along the fence, the stones already bare and slick with the fanning of innumerable fins, when Fusser began her customary interference. Food, she declared, might be found if they looked more carefully; swimming slower would be much less tiring; the other side of the fence, as being toward the south, doubtless was much better. It was then that Swarthy broke.

He rushed Fusser and gave her a sharp stab in the side. Surprised and indignant, she would have maneuvered for an argument, but he wanted none. He rushed her again, viciously. Her method would have been to enlist group aid to curb individual depredations, but Swarthy was for direct action. He stabbed her with his spines.

She sped here and there like a woman throwing up her hands in holy indignation and demanding that the social conscience awake. But, to her utter amazement, she found the very ones for whom she had done

so much strangely unmoved. Swarthy kept after her. Finally she turned on him, as from time immemorial the pacifist has turned when cornered, and turning, gave Swarthy a taste of his own medicine.

It was an hour later that the struggle ended; but when it was over, both Swarthy and Fusser floated lifeless on the surface. For fish are no wiser than men: when nature would allow them to live they often eliminate themselves.

Old Black Bass did not witness the conflict. He was following a secret search for the distant sunfish. Since discovering the first one, he had returned again and again, and always with success. And the ease with which he procured food deepened his contempt for the others.

But great pride usually comes just before a fall. And so now. In the very midst of his own foraging grounds Old Black Bass saw a stranger loitering; and seeing him was on the instant furiously angry. He tore viciously forward, bent on utter destruction.

The stranger was one of his own kind, a great black bass of five summers, confident and strong. On scales he would have

weighed a pound for every year of his age.

All fish are nearsighted, due to the convexity of the lense of the eye; so Old Black Bass was almost upon the intruder before he got his measure. Even then he kept on, so accustomed had he become to undisputed dominance.

But the stranger was unafraid. Nonchalantly he turned, and with his thick muscular shoulder took the full blow. Like the pugilist who, to show his own invincibility and the other's weakness, turns his unprotected face full to his opponent. The blow shook the big bass not at all. He merely squared himself indolently to observe his attacker. For a moment they poised observant. The older fish was gorged with food, else, large as he was, Old Black Bass would have been grist for a voracious mill.

Then the big bass suppressed what would have amounted to a twinkle in his eye. He simulated a towering rage before which Old Black Bass shrank back. A churning of water, and he felt himself knocked into the air. He fell back, only to find his enemy waiting. He was as a cat playing with a

mouse. He circled the smaller fish; rushed at him open-mouthed, only to stop short; flapped him with his tail and turned him over. With a final dash he struck mid-side and sent him careening. Then, boredly, he turned and continued along the fence.

Old Black Bass cast an affrighted glance after him, then made to return to his school, only to find that in his efforts to escape he had drawn very near to it. A scant yard away Leaper and Gloria hugged a sharp rock. They had been frightened observers of the struggle.

Knowledge that they had seen all occasioned the most bitter moment of Old Black Bass's life. A poor loser by disposition, he recked not that either Gloria or Leaper would have fared worse in the encounter than he. To him was only the bitter realization that they had witnessed his discomfiture. When Gloria advanced gracefully to meet him, and even Leaper swam generously over, he wheeled moodily and disappeared.

That evening he was viciously irritable. For a fancied insult he struck in succession two of his companions, and with such force

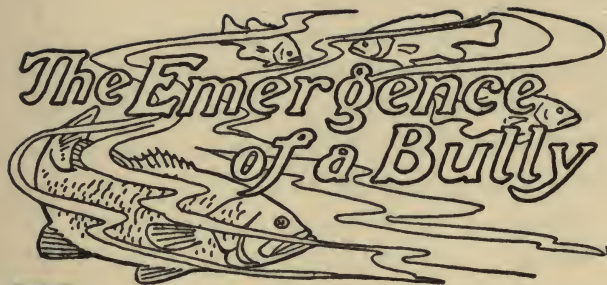
as to burst their air bladders. They wobbled queerly, then flopped over and died.

Rebellion began to brew. Black looks followed his movements, and groups of three and four knotted together here and there as if in consultation. But to each and all his bearing was a bold challenge of force. Alone of all the school Gloria seemed to fear him not at all. Indeed, it was as though his unconquerable temper drew from her an attitude of submission, a submission born not of fear but of admiration. As on another occasion, so now she swam up to him and touched his side lightly, her body squaring gracefully with his.

Then came real winter. Snow flurried to the black water. Waves were lashed by a wind that whistled fiercely among the bare trees. The fish grew comatose. Their bodies chilled, energy seemed to vanish, and they lay close down as in a stupor.

Two months they remained thus, feeding as though from within. Then great cosmic voices whispered to the world that spring was approaching. Unseen forces broke the bonds of winter and liberated the waters.

The fish awoke. Instincts formed in the far racial past informed them of the change, and whispered to them of adulthood. They quickened. A smaller school because of the selections of nature, they yet were a fitter because only the hardy had survived. They leaped to the call of spring.



EVEN as in springtime newly bare-foot children run round and round the house in abandon of exhilaration, so the school of fish felt their spirits lift in unaccountable urge to frolic.

April clouds dropped their warm showers on the water and the fish watched the funny disturbance and grew both excited and irrepressibly playful. Their leapings added to the excitement; their rushing churned the water more than the rain.

In very excess of exuberance a race was staged, not deliberately, for fish do not deliberate, but spontaneously and reflexly,

caused by the quick darting away of the supple Swift.

Swift led at the start, slipping through the soft water like an arrow shot through the air. Spot saw her go and leaped in pursuit like the bounding bounce of a rabbit. Clumsy and Red-eye, Old Black Bass, Leaper and Gloria, Wall-eye and Gap—the school was a fleeting shadow.

Rocks flashed by, a broken birch was skirted so swiftly that the rearward ones scarce knew the cause of the swerving; and leading the way was Swift.

Swift of the flying waters, pectoral and ventral flat against her body, anal and rays of dorsal flared into a rudder, body whipping and straightening too rapidly for the eye! The wide caudal fin, like the leaves of a propeller, caught the water and flinging it back increased the velocity.

She was enjoying it. Cool, energizing water touched her sides after the comatose winter and washed her clean. Impurities slipped away as carbon is blown from a valve.

But close behind was Leaper, body a flying arrow. Like a wing-footed racer put-

ting himself on the stretch, he flung forward in hot pursuit. It was their race. The others fell back, unable to keep the pace.

Leaper gained. Everything he had he used. And he gained another inch. His head was at Swift's tail and creeping slowly to her pectoral. Intoxication of achievement gave him added energy. With great surge he flung forward. He would win!

But have you ever seen Collie race with Greyhound? Then you know how Collie flattens out, tearing along, ears laid back. You know how she gains and creeps up. But you know more: the apparent ease with which the long lean body of the hound flexes, and the incredible speed that follows!

So it was with Swift. When Leaper nosed her pectoral, without apparent greater effort on her part she slipped away and left him. Then stopped and waited, twinkling, to let him come along.

The others overtook them finally, Old Black Bass feigning preoccupation to belittle Swift's and Leaper's achievement and minimize his own defeat. He dis-

played no amazement or excitement as did the others, but fretted impatiently to be on.

Straight ahead was a place of witchery for the bass. It was the kind of a spot to which their natures cried out a welcome, even as the human soul cries its welcome to spring; though why the bass loved a place like this they could not have told.

It was an area of forming lily-pads, of incipient green; an acre of bottom unlike the rocky ledges, but coming luscious and rich. It was as yet too early for the full-formed pads and much of the food. But even so they recognized it as a place of interest and attraction, though they had never been there before. It was the Voice; the old Paleozoic Voice that first called to the fishes back in the dim age when vertebrates arose.

In response to this voice the fish live and move and have their being. It is instinct. It is the call of food, of sex, of gregariousness, of sociality. Those without it perish, those having it obey. It called now to the feeding-ground.

The spot was occupied, for the day was perfect for the fisherman. It was morning,

but the sun was hidden; it was warm, but a slight breeze made a dancing ruffle.

Scarce had the school entered the beguiling region when a gay lure struck the water before them. It lay motionless for a moment, then began a whirling course through the water. It lifted, darted sidewise, dipped; it slackened speed, only to dart away.

Gap saw the thing, and he was hungry. What with the lean feeding days just passed and the race, the white fiber of his stomach was but a contracted pouch. And here was food, enough to last long.

He rose to it. But whether from sudden aversion to his kind, or from inexplicable love of shore, he closed on the lure and followed it to land.

An interval and the plug came back. It was Leaper's turn. Not that he was so hungry; for three delicious hellgramites had been his luck the day before. But he was curious. He wanted to know what this thing felt like, acted like, tasted like.

His tail swirled as he struck it and missed. He struck again, determined to satisfy himself. He connected with the front of it with

his superior maxillary, knocking the lure clear out of the water.

He was measurably satisfied. It was smooth and hard, whatever it was: the bump he had given it shook his head. He returned happily to the others and interestedly waited.

Grinnie had preferred to watch rather than participate. Even when the thing spatted the water above her she remained fairly calm. But when it began to depart, something within utterly uncontrollable urged pursuit. She simply could not let it get away. She followed, propelled by the same instinct of movement that drives the cat after the vanishing ball. But she must have gone too far, for she never returned.

Old Black Bass had been a surly spectator. He hungered not, neither did the lure fascinate him. He did feel a vast contempt for Leaper when he missed. But he remained aloof, simply watching.

Time after time the lure raked the water. And finally it got on Old Black Bass's nerves. For what reason should this red and white intruder continue to frolic above him? And since when was it considered

safe to so disturb him with impunity? Clearly this little whippersnapper needed the same lesson the others had so thoroughly learned.

His anger mounted. He lifted slightly, determined to show it and all the others. When he struck he lunged savagely, opening and closing his mouth once, twice, with a queer "chugging" sound. Only the inexperience of the angler saved Old Black Bass, for he was reeling the lure too swiftly, resolved to change it for another; and the fish was not hooked.

In vain did he cast again and again. Old Black Bass's anger had disquieted the school, and, refusing to rise again, they went on down the lake in search of a quieter spot.

Of course the fish did not know it, but they had here given the only true answer to the question asked about so many camp fires of evenings: "Why does a bass strike an artificial lure?" And they had answered it by the motive which had impelled each to strike.

The mind of man is obsessed by a desire to reduce everything to one simple formula.

He wants one law for each class of phenomena: for gravitation, for motive, for worship, one principle for all true government. And he has sought for one motive to explain every fish's strike.

He will never find it. One fish differs from another as one dog from another or one boy differs from another boy. The first boy throws a stone through the grocery-man's window because he is mad at the storekeeper; the second does the same thing because he is curious about the result; the third because he is hungry and wants the cookies behind the glass; and the fourth merely because he wants to throw and surging nature is prompting him.

So do fish strike. One is curious, one hungry, one instinctive in chasing a moving object, one is angry. No explanation that overlooks individual differences to seek a common motive will ever be accurate. To explain a strike is to know the nature of the one fish concerned.

As the school continued on its way Old Black Bass alone retained his mood. He brooded over the lure. Not so much because he missed it, for he had struck only

to buffet. His brooding took him almost to the realm of abstract thought. For just as in the human realm a Shakespeare is born who knows more of English than the average man, or an Edison of electricity, or a Faraday of physics in general, so Old Black Bass was a genius of his species and as such capable of more than they.

He came near to fathoming the secret of the artificial lure. Gap and Grinnie, who had not come back, were forgotten incidents with the others. But to Old Black Bass they gave point to an awful lesson. A crawfish is capable of learning in forty lessons which is the best way to reach food; but Old Black Bass was already learning that not all that cavorts on the water is safe for food.

From that day onward he discriminated his food. Before taking it he demanded of himself absolute knowledge of its nature. Was it alive, or only cleverly artificial? Was a slender line connected to it, or did it swim free?

And this canniness put him in the class of rare bass of which the true angler dreams: the subtly clever fish who are wise beyond

their kind, and whose wisdom rouses the true fisherman as a rare species lures the hunter.

And while Old Black Bass did not know the ways of men in the great outside world, there was such a fisherman who should one day visit Lone Pine; and during that visit the wise bass and the clever angler should meet and contend.

It was the day following that he did another of the despicable things that had earned for him the hatred of the entire school. A stone from an old fence slid quickly down and pinned Red-eye by the tail. Gloria hurried quickly to him to help, just as one ram will patiently endeavor to remove the thorn from the head of another.

And she was succeeding. Red-eye was in a panic and struggling violently while Gloria nosed blindly at the stone. It gave, and the impinioned tail slipped a fraction.

Then Old Black Bass did an atrocious thing. Why he did it, who knows? Perhaps in a dim way he was angered at himself that he also had not been quick to aid; but not having proffered such aid, perhaps wanted to show that another kind of action

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was preferable. He struck the helpless Red-eye. It was the act of a bully striking a bound man. Red-eye was stunned. He tried to free himself; but head up in his efforts, was struck again and killed.

Leaper swam over and nosed his dead comrade; then turned and surveyed Old Black Bass with loathing, and the loathing he felt was in the hearts of all. Old Black Bass from that hour became a stranger though present. He was hated and shunned—but feared.

VI



IN this tale we must distinguish between a language and a vocabulary.

A phonetic vocabulary is possible only to man, for he alone possesses the physiological mechanism to use it. The parrot is excluded, for its vocabulary is to speech what a picture is to reality.

Consequently, fish have no vocabulary; but they have a language. They talk just as the crow talks when it sends a warning, or the dog when it is hot on the scent.

We must distinguish also between the mental state and the expression of such a state. The deaf mute may be angry, though he possess no vocabulary with which to up-

braid ; may love, without being able to speak of it in words.

So fish may know without giving voice to the knowledge, or feel without vocal accompaniment. Since, however, this is the story of a fish designed for men to read, the mental and emotional states of the fish may be given their corresponding human word signs, so that all who read may understand.

It is significant, therefore, that the central figure of this story was early given the name of Old Black Bass. In the human realm are boys old and mature beyond their years, lacking the playful spirit and looking at life through disillusioned eyes. These oldish boys are usually addressed as "Old Bill" or "Old Tom" or "Old Dave," the significance being that they are adult and oldish in their attitudes.

Old Black Bass was so named because he was old in spirit, critical, lacking the playful attitude, fiercely belligerent when others were playfully sportive. He discouraged friendliness, scoffed at young helpfulness, hurt cruelly, killed without mercy.

Men have two kinds of names, the Christian name given to the young child, which is

a sort of formal appellation for social convenience; and the nickname, a spontaneous description of the impression one is making on his fellows. Thus his mother calls him Jacob, but to his fellow twelve-year-olds he is Fatty; the family Bible records him as Samuel, but to his playmates he is Red.

Fish have no formal names, but all are nicknamed. One is Gloria because of the soft sweetness of her disposition, or Spot because of a queer mark on the cheek, or Gap on account of a funny gasping way he had of breathing. So it was Old Black Bass because he was adult in his reactions and sour in disposition.

The school took advice from him, but were intimate not at all; respected his strength as fearing his anger; curbed the growing hatred toward him only as though biding a better time.

In May came the mating urge. Just as spring draws the green leaf from dark twig, or morning the sunflower's heart to East, so the warming waters brought to life the mating impulse. On its coming Leaper and Gloria swam gayly away. Clumsy and Wall-eye, Spot and Wriggle, Darter and

Sober, after a day of strange restlessness, followed them.

Some of the school remained unmoved by the pervasive call; for some bass spawn not till the second year. These looked upon the restlessness of their fellows and comprehended it not.

Old Black Bass had preened in his awkward way for the eye of Gloria, while Swift more than once nosed Leaper and frisked for shoreward waters. But he followed not, nor did Gloria have eye for Old Black Bass. When she swam off with Leaper, Old Black Bass went rapidly to Swift and with her went away.

Back and to over the yard-wide bed went Swift and her companion, fanning clean the stones. With his sturdy nose Old Black Bass moved to one side the stones too large for the bed. The work was tedious and tiring, yet it was accomplished without injury to either. While the trout usually wears caudal fin and tail to the bone in making its nest, the bass accomplishes the same task without blood.

The eggs were deposited on the stones, ten thousand in number. Old Black Bass

fertilized them as they stuck there; and the vigil of watchfulness began. On the third day as Swift hung above the nest an ancient enemy made quick attack.

A fish hawk, foe of the bass, from his perch on an oak, saw the dark back moving ceaselessly under the water. He waited, tense for the swoop. Dark back rose nearer surface, and the hawk dropped.

A clean kill was prevented only by Old Black Bass. He was faithful here because nature held him up. Scarce had he rushed Swift aside when there was quick spat above where she had been. But the disappointed hawk lifted and flapped away with empty talons. Just settled were they when a lively hellgramite fell on the water and sank to the bed. Swift eyed it angrily, but approached it not. It was dragged clumsily over the stones, while she circled above it, extremely annoyed. Then it slipped shoreward.

An angler was out there, casting his lures. An out-of-season fisherman, for the law was on bass. But while many men strive to protect the fish, a few also break laws to catch them.



"A fish hawk, ancient foe of the bass, swooped down."

The hellgramite came back. Swift flew at it, and retaining it by a sucking movement of the mouth bore it away and spat it far. Again it reappeared, only to be as speedily removed.

Then came a frog, a striped pickerel frog of alluring color. It floated and kicked on the surface for full three minutes, then sank slowly down. It dropped to the nest and struggled there. The movements stirred hot anger and resentment in Swift, for they were displacing her eggs.

Again she darted down. She got the frog and was bearing it away when a strange thing happened. The amphibian was cleverly fastened to an ingenious spring hook, which suddenly snapped apart and caught in her mouth. With the spring, the line tightened. The bass was jerked over backward, but rushed wildly while being reeled in. On the shore the angler took her from the hook and slipped her in a pocket of his hunting coat. Chuckling to himself, he moved on up the lake.

The nest Swift left behind would thenceforth remain unguarded; and this meant the death of the life she had placed there. She

had laid ten thousand eggs, and with her going went the hope that any from her spawn should live. Pickerel found the nest and fed upon the eggs; turtles crawled over it and broke them; dirt drifted over the stones and covered them up.

But the fisherman was clever. Nine bass he caught that day, and five of them were from the nest, caught with the clever spring hook. One of the five was guarding seventy-five thousand eggs, and the other four a total of thirty-seven thousand. All told, he took the protection from one hundred and twelve thousand possible bass: one hundred and twelve thousand possible stock for the waters of the future—impoverishing the lake for the fisherman who should come after him—making obedience to law a handicap—contributing to the death of a species at its source.

On his way home this man met the angler who the spring before had caused the death of Hump Back by roughly batting the unoffending little fish into the water, angered that it was undersize.

"No luck, I bet," he growled. "Ain't no fish any more."

"Rotten luck," the former agreed. "Only nine."

"Fishin' ain't what it used to be. Onct I could go out and git a mess in an hour."

"Couldn't we, though?" the first agreed. "But them times ain't any more."

"I'll say they ain't!"

"Makes me tired."

"Me too."

"Too danged much fishin'."

"And pollutin' the water."

"City fellers!"

"Dudes!"

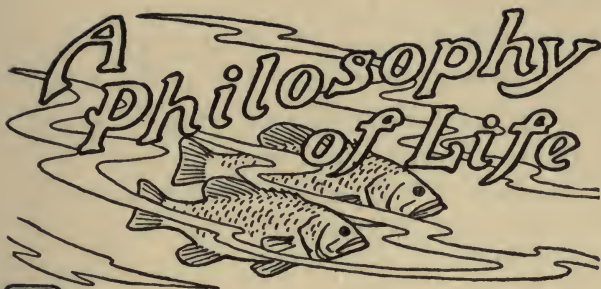
It was on the departure of Swift that Old Black Bass for the first time in his life felt a sense of incompleteness that made him vaguely sorrowful. He knew the cause of her departure: he had seen the line running shoreward from the frog. But it was not so much sorrow for her that he felt as it was some obscure troubling of his nature due to this new and sudden isolation.

It was his first experience of the need of another. From out the depths his nature questioned him and revealed a haunting desire. New and vague, it yet disclosed that within him which, if called out, might

make him over from the surly, morose nature to a disposition truly social and altruistic.

For a day he lingered about the nest uncertain, even as a puppy whimpers about the litter-bed from which its companions have been taken. Then he swam slowly around the spot, turned toward the deep, and went his solitary way.

VII



IN the life of the bass time flies more rapidly than with men. For him one year is as five to man. Five times may the earth revolve around its parent body to age a boy as one revolution ages the fish.

So with the rolling seasons the fish of our school rapidly matured. At five years they were transformed from the little quarter-inch wrigglers to mature specimens, comparable in age to men of twenty-five.

Not, of course, that all were the same size. Among men the question is often asked as to how large a bass of five years really is. As if an answer could be given! At six

months the average may run around six inches; at the Neosho station a bass known to be under eighteen months of age was found to weigh one pound nine and three-quarter ounces.

But who would ask how large men are at twenty-five? The question could be put but not answered; for men vary in size and weight. Some are tall, others short; some fat, others skinny; some big, others small. To strike an average would be to exclude all.

It is even so with bass. In some Southern waters they have weighed at maturity as much as twenty-three pounds. The country over they vary as men vary. But in Lone Pine he was a big bass that at five years should tip the scales at seven pounds.

Not that all the members of our school ever reached maturity. A table of vital statistics among men will show that of one hundred thousand children of ten years, ninety-six thousand two hundred and eighty-five live to reach fifteen, ninety-three thousand three hundred and sixty-two reach nineteen, and only eight hundred and forty-seven reach ninety.

So time ravages a school of fish, save that with them we have illustration of nature's vast design to perpetuate the species. For she has so fixed it that the more hazardous the infancy of a species the more numerous is the progeny to begin with. The average American family is 2.5, but human infants are protected, so that the species may keep alive on such a slender birth rate.

But, what with the storm and the snake, the turtle and the pickerel, the frog and the hawk, the muskrat and the fisherman, the infancy of the fish is beset with peril. But nature provides for this by a more prolific birth rate. The carp deposits her eggs promiscuously, and without parental care they drift as the sport of the waters and the food of water life; but she lays as high as seven hundred thousand eggs, so that with all the hazards the species multiplies. The infancy of the bass being less perilous, ten thousand eggs per spawn are sufficient to keep the species alive. But even so, all life presents a fierce struggle of life with death.

Time has taken the ten thousand eggs of the mother of our school and winnowed them till at five years there are but nineteen

left. But of these nineteen Old Black Bass is undisputed ruler. His is a body of iron, black and tremendously strong. And of disposition he is indescribably bold.

To the contemplative eye he would suggest the weight of seven pounds. His thickness, being one third of his length, gave him an unwieldy appearance that deceived the eye as to his real agility. Up on his flat back the nine spines of his dorsal flared like sharp bayonets, tapered by the thirteen rays behind.

His great body was marked by a delicate lateral line, the fish's sense for locating the direction of shocks and for gauging the depth of water by its pressure. From gill to tail along this line were twenty-three rows of scales, seven above and sixteen below, and in each row were sixty-eight scales—dark scales glossy from an internal ointment, scales that flashed and glistened, an exoskeleton of protection.

His head was the head of a fighter: cheek armored by ten rows of glistening scales; maxillary cleaving the head; mouth gleaming with cruel teeth; and cold, lidless eyes filled with brooding—eyes through which

he surveyed the world with a boldness that challenged everything and bowed to nothing!

Many were the factors that had fashioned him: physical heredity that had endowed him with measureless vigor, power that had awakened and nourished the sense of despotism, jealousy of Leaper that had soured him, defeat by the great bass that had embittered him. But at five years he swam at the head of his school, feared by many and hated by all.

Leaper feared him not. And while of slighter build and less treacherous disposition, he nevertheless was fish enough to give full account of himself in any encounter. And the encounter came on a morning in early May.

Sober was tired and thin from the winter. With the school she was as yet almost too tired and listless to try for food. Leaper had foraged afar and with good success. Voracious as he was, his appetite was satisfied. But near the pickerel weed off shore he ran down a frog, and with it in his mouth approached Sober. In front of her he dropped it for her to eat. It was an act

similar to that of the rooster when he calls his hens to a morsel of his finding.

With a kindly flap of the tail, Sober made for it, pathetically grateful to Leaper. But ere she could get it Old Black Bass rushed in and gobbled it down.

It was too much even for Leaper. His position was similar to that of a suitor whose offering to his lady has been ruthlessly thrown out by an angry rival, and that before the lady's very eyes.

Sober dropped back, a questioning eye on Leaper. The others saw the act and closed in, curious as to the probable effect. Old Black Bass, by his attitude of raw disdain, fanned the incident to open insult. He craved a break with Leaper.

To Leaper it was more an affair of principle than a personal affront. He had been doing a good deed and his work had been broken in upon by selfishness. All the altruism born within him rose to the conflict.

The others sensed the impending struggle, for they remained near to watch. Nervousness was the portion of many; yet not a few meant to watch for signs that Old

Black Bass was weakening, when they would join in and even old scores against him.

Old Black Bass struck first, his pale, near-sighted eyes eager at the prospect. Mouth closed he thrust his hard snout against Leaper's side. The scales along the lateral line gave way at the impact, and red wound showed dull beneath it.

Dorsal spines sharp drawn, Leaper lurched sidewise and brought the needle points tearing across the great fish's belly. Small, fine scales silvered the water.

Angered at this vicious thrust, Old Black Bass charged mouth open, and his wicked teeth dragged Leaper's gill slits above the red blood vessels. He checked himself, only to receive in return a heavy thrust from Leaper's head.

The first recklessness passed, the two settled down to a struggle of attrition. There were maneuvers for advantage, skillful retreats, deft feints, bold rushes, supple thrusts, wicked slashes; and again the maneuver for advantage.

But from the first the outcome was determined. No fish in the school could stand

against Old Black Bass. And with fierce satisfaction he had known this from the beginning.

But as the struggle dragged out, this satisfaction dwindled. Of what value the victory to him when it would occasion only regret among his kind? And how could he boast of it, when in his heart he knew he was in the wrong? For he did know this. The altruistic instinct is born within the fish, and he knows when he is violating it.

At first he had thought that this mattered but little; that only the conquest counted. But as the fight waged and he fought with success more and more assured, it came over him that victory would mean defeat. It would make him more than ever an outcast. And what is triumph with no one to rejoice?

But more than this came to him. He saw that Leaper was right and he was wrong; he sensed a greater than he before him, though the greater was weaker. Never—suddenly and clearly he knew it—could he hope to be Leaper's equal, though he should conquer him. For while he was an individualist, wrecking for his own pleasure, Leaper was defending the principle of

altruism which the ages had taught his kind.

Nor was this championing of altruism remarkable. It was as surely instinct within as the fighting tendency, though it was social. And because Old Black Bass had the social instinct in sufficient degree to enable him to appreciate this, he now understood that Leaper was greater than he, for he was defending the principles the ages had taught him.¹

Of a sudden Leaper drove home a barb that tore cruelly, and at the pain Old Black Bass felt not so much anger as queer pleasure. He was sick of the role of the bully, sick of the rule of force, sick of hard glances, sick of Gloria's loathing. This fierce stab of pain was about what he deserved, and the fact that he was getting it gave him fierce satisfaction.

In the human realm a man may in his high selfishness turn his back on the friendliness of home and wander in a far country. But in time he drains life to the dregs and by the swineherd remembers his father's house. So Old Black Bass had ramped

¹Confer Jordan's *Fishes*, p. 40ff., for discussion of the instincts of fish.

through life with thought of self alone, only to sense vaguely now that real contentment is bound up with friendliness of his kind. Without this friendliness he should lose his life, even though he save it.

Leaper was coming at him when this lonely realization rose to trouble him; Leaper loved of his kind, Leaper fighting to the death for principle not so much of value to himself as to his species. But even as he came the grim light of his eye faded to weariness. His mouth sagged, and the torn gill slit quivered in fatigue.

It was here that Old Black Bass surrendered. Instead of pressing his advantage he exposed himself to attack. But Leaper was too wearied to note it. Wearily he turned on his side, then desperately righted himself. The sympathy of the school went out to him, and as one they rose against Old Black Bass. They had not understood, of course, the awakening that had come over him. They knew only that he was killing their comrade. So they swarmed about him, buffeting him without mercy, rushing him fiercely; and drove him unresisting from the school.

By a great ledge of rock far out in the lake he found a sanctuary. Remorse was his, the first he had ever known. And loneliness. Now it was denied him, he coveted the company of his kind. The friendly school dashes through the darkening waters, little acts denoting understanding and helpfulness—for all these a Voice cried out within him, an old Paleolithic voice that surged and troubled.

Blindly he made his way back toward the school. Leaper was in the midst of it, object of solicitude from Gloria, subject of sympathy from all. When Old Black Bass entered the outer fringe, they surveyed him with resentment and renewed loathing. Dorsal spines flared on many backs, expectant of attack.

But he struck not. He had learned that it is not by might or power, blustering or force, but by a kindly spirit that the world is gained. And realizing this, he coveted nothing more than a chance to let his fellows see that at last he understood.

Chances came. A school of shiners was encountered, and he held back till the others had fed. Hot sun beat upon the

waters, and there was scarce room in the shade of the rock for all. But he allowed them to take the better places. A turtle dropped among them, sliding from the stone, and with vigor he drove it away. A muskrat roiled the water about them till it felt the sudden thrust of his body.

And these things he did from day to day, still unobtrusive, humble, and with questioning. And in time the attitude toward him mellowed. Even fish despise not the broken and contrite spirit. Glances of anger changed to wonder, wonder to eagerness, and eagerness to understanding. A place, small at first but increasingly large, he was making for himself in the affections of his kind.

With one exception. Clumsy was like some people: he interpreted all nonresistance as cowardice. So when he saw the change in Old Black Bass he thought it fear. He thought the conflict with Leaper had tamed him to unwilling but discreet submission. When the big fish persisted in keeping his humble place, Clumsy went back to annoy him forward in hope of provoking a fight. He even dared once himself

to rush Old Black Bass, hoping to win repute for valor for doing it. And when he encountered patience, his daring increased: he tried to chase the big fellow from the school.

But Old Black Bass bore it all without flare of resentment. At times he even welcomed it, as giving chance to discipline his wild nature. Only once did he come near forgetting himself. Clumsy snatched a shiner from Old Black Bass that the latter was turning about to swallow head-first, and this was done in the presence of Gloria. It was open and flagrant insult. The great dorsal flared like bristles on the back of an Airedale. Opening jaws exposed gleaming teeth; there was movement of gathering muscles over the big body.

But he subsided, the anger leaving him. And instead of sensing his danger, Clumsy concluded that henceforth he could do anything with impunity. In this conclusion, though he knew it not at the time, he was unwise, as time would tell.

On a day the school was foraging down near the great dyke when it encountered a bass from a strange school—a wanderer,

lost after a wild hour with an angler—a female of four years, graceful and comely. She joined the school with the eagerness of loneliness, and seeing the great and kindly bass, swam to him at once.

Her whole manner toward him was of admiration and respect. She touched his side gently and waited, fanning with tawny pelvic fins. This was the first real friendliness Old Black Bass had ever encountered, directed at himself alone. It stirred something deep within him. As if afraid of the ridicule of the school he looked quickly about him, but he saw only sympathy.

He turned to the stranger, and she was stranger no longer. Her glance was so direct and open, her movement so ingenuously appealing, that from that hour she became Friendly, and by that name was ever known. Taking her place beside Old Black Bass, the school went leisurely through the sparkling waters.

VIII



HE mating season of the fifth year! Spring called forth the change. A mild pressure of roe caused the females to respond in subtle manner to the advances of the males, while males courted with all the gallantry and persistence of their kind.

Their color had changed. It was the nuptial coloration that deepens the red bird's wing and touches the throat of the robin. The heads of the male bass turned a darker hue, while the exoskeleton was of richer polish. Lateral lines sprayed mucous gloss over their bodies till they were sleek as a trotter fresh from the brush and rub.

Nature has provided the bass with three kinds of coloration: the protective, which makes him dark on back and light on belly. Seen from above, dark objects in water blend almost indistinguishably with their medium, so the bass's dark back shields him from fish hawk's keen eye; while from below him and looking up all objects appear lighter. Thus his belly blends him with his environment like a chameleon. Then there is the sex coloration, which produces the darker male and the lighter female. But finally is the nuptial change which comes at mating time. It was this which now touched Gloria and Gay and Friendly and their sisters with a rare pale silver as alluring to the males as maiden's shy blush is to the eager eyes of her lover.

Unlike the viviparous white perch, which carries her young in her body as do the higher mammals, the bass are oviparous. First the roe, then the eggs, next the tiny spawn, and last the school. So the fish paired and went their nesting way as man and maiden pair to build the home.

There was no hesitation now. Old Black Bass and Friendly went together, she

proudly happy, he in high protective eagerness, swinging with a vast confidence and show of power, though his force was now tempered with kindliness.

Friendly had not known him in his days of surliness, so she looked for nothing but good in him, and, looking, found it. He was model. Never had male guarded nest with more jealous care.

A picnicking party was on shore one day; and a boy of ten was allowed to go in the water. His course took him within sight of Friendly's nest, and his curiosity took him further. He waded toward it.

Old Black Bass watched him approach with growing apprehension. Friendly swam nearer as if to seek his protection. The boy kept on. The water was too deep for him to reach the nest, but the bass did not know this. He was already too near for them.

Old Black Bass began swimming nervously back and to, back and to, like the ceaseless padding of a caged leopard. His aspect was fierce. The boy was dropping his hand into the water and catching up handfuls scattering it like a sower his seed.

This especially gave Old Black Bass concern. The drops fell on the surface and disturbed it, rolling like white diamonds dangerously near the nest.

For Old Black Bass the hand became an instrument of danger. He approached it and receded, threshed the water near it, tried to frighten it away. He was not successful. But he did not flee. Instead he did a thing which many bass at mating time have been known to do. He rushed the hand, leaped clear of the water, and struck it.

The great surging body and the impact frightened the boy, and he turned and went back; while Old Black Bass dropped down in rejoicing. His reward came when Friendly slipped up to him and touched his side with her lips.

But he was to be called on still further to protect his nest and his mate. Only the next day a great water snake slid out over the bottom in search of fish eggs. It was three feet and one inch from fang to tail; and during the years of its life had many times glided over clean-fanned spawn beds and gorged.



"Old Black Bass steeled his mighty heart for the conflict."

Old Black Bass saw it coming, and the fear that is within man for the reptile filled him with nausea, for the snake is ancient enemy to the fish: fish that have survived have feared and fought it; those without fear of it succumbed to its treachery. The result is a snake-hating species. Involuntarily Old Black Bass felt the scales of his cheek crawl loathsomely, yet he did not flee.

Other bass have done what he did that day¹; but no amount of repetition would make the feat less heroic. The snake was three times the length of Old Black Bass, and wise and fearless with years. It slid toward the nest like a silk line reeled swiftly over the surface—beautifully, with graceful undulations. Two inches behind the jaw the body arched, holding the head triumphantly high.

For the first time in his life Old Black Bass gave ground. Not through fear, for he knew it not. It was an involuntary movement of loathing and repulsion, life's normal shrinking from the snake since the curse was placed upon it in the Garden.

¹See volume on *Artificial Propagation of Black Basses, Crappies, and Rock Bass*, No. 347, United States Commission of Fish and Fisheries, for a statement of black bass killing snake three times its own length.

This was his first real bodily encounter with the reptile. But he needed no experience to guide him. The experience of the past was his as a racial habit; and now the Voice of the ages told him what to do.

The snake reached the nest and slid its flat head over the first stone and sucked up an egg. Lidless eyes flamed with gluttony. Then it sensed Old Black Bass's approach and jerked its head threateningly high. Black tongue licked warning.

But the big fish's hard maxillary met the sinuous body six inches back of the head and thrust it off the nest. There was lightning-quick contraction and Old Black Bass was wrapped up in the coils of the reptile as a mummy is swathed in bandages. But the slick mucous that covered him now served him well: the very pressure of the snake caused the fish to slip through the coils like an apple seed shot from a youngster's fingers.

For the first time the snake showed anger and seriousness. Its eyes glowed with wicked determination. Like the hammer of a gun drawn back and then let fall, its muscular body reared up and descended on

the fish, fangs sinking deep. Had it been its cousin the water moccasin, poison would have killed. But the water snake's bite is not poisonous. But the fangs pierced and tore the flesh, and flowing blood dyed the water.

The conflict drew them too near the nest, and for all he was fighting for his life Old Black Bass was the parent on vigil; he maneuvered the snake away from the bed. To avoid another slash from the fangs he leaped clear of the water. Descending he cut through and attacked.

Suddenly he knew he would win, and the great joy of the conflict took possession of him. Here at last he could fight without reproach. His great jaws opened and sharp gleaming teeth were bare. Eight inches back of the head he caught the snake and closed down. Giant maxillaries clamped over the body in a vice like the tireless jaws of a bull dog.

The snake arched its ribs to break the hold, but only was crushed the more; contracted to ease the pain, but was pierced near through. There was still length enough to permit strike, and, arching, the

snake sank its fangs in the fish's side. But a crunching of the great jaws caused it to writhe and loosen.

It twisted and whipped, its tail out of the water and flailing the surface. But it was done. Fifteen minutes after it had sucked up the first egg its body drifted through the water inert, backbone broken; and Old Black Bass was in his position as outer guard at the nest of Friendly.

The next day he felt weak. The water he breathed through his gills seemed vapid and unsatisfying. He gulped it, but it passed over his gills like a malarial current. The wounds in his body were not healed by it, but were fretted and aggravated.

Friendly also was acting queerly, though she had not fought the snake. She wavered over the nest like a minnow in a pail of stale water, gasping, rolling to her side, gulping. A rock bass floated on the surface above, bloated. Perch floated by also, and more rock bass; a great black bass drifted above them, gulping the air for a time, then died, and its body was washed to the shore where it lay the food of turtles.

A fever was sweeping the upper lake.

Long it had waged, and at last had reached as far down as the nest of Friendly. It was a fever of poison. Up at the head of the lake was a mine, started two months back by a corporation which sensed the wealth of the hills.

Poisonous water from this mine ran copper-colored down into the lake. The stones on the surrounding bottom turned brick red. Waters crystal before were now polluted by a pervasive death. The medium which gives life to the fish as air gives it to man was corrupted. They breathed it, but it did not satisfy; gulped it more freely, but the very increase of quantity poisoned them the more.

True fishermen had seen it and complained. But the corporation's profit would have been cut one thirtieth of one per cent had the copper-colored poison been diverted to a cesspool and refined, so it was not done.

But there was in existence an organization formed for just such a time as this; and it took a vigorous hand. The American Game Protective Association was apprised of the situation and acted vigorously and at

once. Pressure was brought to bear where it would do the most good; and the flow of brown poison was stopped.

Old Black Bass did not know who had befriended him; but the sweet water came again and he breathed it deep. Friendly righted herself and took up again her high vigil above her nest. Dead fish no more floated above them, for Lone Pine had been purified.

While, of course, Old Black Bass did not know it, yet in the streams of a thousand rivers this poison is let loose through greed; and to the fish hawk and the mink, the muskrat and the snake, the frog and the turtle, is added another enemy of the bass—the enemy of Greed.

And this enemy, because of its insidious nature and its seeming economic justification, is the Great Destroyer of the waters. It is the Black Death of the fish. But some day the friend will be as powerful as the foe, and Man will intervene to prevent the extermination of a species. The Spirit of the Fisherman will rejoice to see that good day.

The little school placed safely, Old

FISH MEETS CANNY ANGLER 95

Black Bass and his mate went a-wandering over the lake. One by one they found their kindred, knowing them by various peculiarities known among men as "recognition-marks." At such meetings there was general friendliness and pleasure, till Clumsy was found.

He nosed Old Black Bass insolently, and took up his sport of annoyance. He misinterpreted the friendly manner with which the big fish allowed him to approach, misconstruing it as timidity. So day after day he kept up his work: asserted his right to best shades, took the food that Old Black Bass would have eaten, disported about him in the presence of the others. It annoyed Old Black Bass exceedingly. Many times his expression was that of the older dog mused and wooled by the pup. But he refrained from retaliation.

But by the end of the week Clumsy was cavorting about Friendly. She took it all good-naturedly; at times flattered by it even as a girl responds to the admiration of a youngster she cares little for.

Only then did a strange light begin to burn in the red iris of Old Black Bass's eye.

By threatening movements he tried to give warnings, but Clumsy heeded them not. Rather, he was delighted that at last he had found a vulnerable spot.

In vain did the big fish try to hold himself in check. He desired no trouble. But in time his patience gave way. Rising suddenly he buffeted the astonished Clumsy a full half yard. And before he could recover from his amazement he was put upon again. The great tail lashed him; the heavy head pounded him on the side with the force of a battering ram; cruel teeth gleamed directly before his eyes. For five minutes Old Black Bass was a throw-back, a reversion to his former self, terrible in rage, red-lusting for blood.

As ever with the coward, Clumsy scampered away, crestfallen, outraged. And to his surreptitious bids for sympathy and backing he received only amusement and ridicule.

Then came the big fish's struggle with the old riverman. A great angler came to Lone Pine and pitched his pup tent up near the inlet. The evening of his arrival he spent sorting his tackle.

He took a reel from a leather pouch and went over it with an oiled cloth; carefully, lovingly, as though he enjoyed the task. He unscrewed an agate jewel and put a tiny bit of vaseline in the grease cup. A new silk line of dark green he fastened to the spool and turned it carefully on.

Then he took a steel bait casting rod from its case and ran his eye over the agate leaders; went over it with the oiled cloth till the tapering metal shone like smooth ebony.

In a small box he found abundance of tackle which he sorted with infinite care. It was the box he had whiled away winter evenings over; and its contents represented his judgment on lures.

The polished rod and the noiseless-running reel he placed near him, and beside them the selected lures. He drew the fire and turned in till morning.

At four o'clock he was frying bacon and eggs beside the sputtering coffee pot. His face wore a look of pleased satisfaction, for it was a bass morning. He was alone; clouds were banked in the sky; and the black water spread out before him. Now here,

now there, was a swirl as a big one struck or a splash as a neighbor leaped.

Carefully he jointed rod, adjusted reel, and attached a lure. Then he waded waist deep into the water, and cast far out. And, as is so often arranged by Fate, Old Black Bass had chosen that spot for his feeding ground that morning.

But the canny monster was not fooled by the lure. It was too unwieldy to be mistaken. Many times in the five years of his life he had seen such plugs in the water. Friendly made for it, but he thrust her aside and she lay low. But Clumsy darted for it, and five minutes later made first catch in a large creel. Old Black Bass was indifferent to his going, but he did fidget nervously when Wall-eye connected. The beautiful fish fought bravely, rushing madly, leaping and shaking her head savagely. But she followed Clumsy to the creel. After five years together, they lay at the last in the same creel.

For a full half hour the lures tantalized the waters. Plugs that swayed and swam and dived and floated and wriggled; feathered lures that ran deep and skimmed

the surface; spoons of brass and glittering silver. Once when a toothsome frog hit the surface and lay kicking there, Old Black Bass felt the hunger urge to strike. But a Voice of caution stayed him.

But the great angler was clever. He drew in the rejected lure and changed it for a plain hook. This plain hook he inserted just behind the dorsal fin of a slender shiner. He threw both far to one side, and by clever leading made the minnow swim in a circle about him, but far out.

Old Black Bass had been waiting for another plug to strike and be drawn straight in. Hanging expectant, he was startled by the till-then-unnoticed approach of this venturesome shiner. It annoyed him to be interrupted. More in annoyance than hunger he struck, caught the hapless minnow and gobbled him down—only to feel a quick decisive jerk, and a sharp stab of pain in his throat. A thin, hard line sawed his mouth and he closed his teeth on it. But the gut leader would not part.

Immediately he dashed to surface and leaped high, his great head shaking savagely. But still the pull shoreward. He

reared and made for deep, only to be let go. Far out the gentle pull of line brought him up. He darted back, leaped, rushed sidewise; but ever the gentle pressure from the shallows. It was this gentle pull that drove him mad—insinuating, relentless, portentous, inexorable.

He opened his mouth and let his gills go limp, the while he bucked the pressure. His *æ*sophagus gave, and the hook pulled out to the base of the tongue. Another leap and the hook tore partly out. If the pressure on it were relaxed, letting it slip back slightly, it might come free. But Old Black Bass did not know this. The angler did.

Vainly he fought, but with growing weariness. Fifteen minutes passed. The pull was drawing him in. But he cared little. Already the objects about him appeared dark; already he had ceased to draw the water through his gills. He did little more than flap with caudal in weak effort at resistance. His body was unwieldy, cumbersome, unresponsive.

He was near the surface. A black shadow loomed up above him; a circular

object net-like in structure, lowered and advanced. It sank about him. But at the touch he was terrified. He bounded back like a man who suddenly encounters an unknown object in the dark. Inspired by the blind terror the sudden jerk was of greater force than any he had exerted before. He shot high into the air and turned. The hook slipped back, turned, and passed out over his teeth, leaving him free.

He zigzagged wearily back to Friendly.

IX



OLD BLACK BASS and Friendly swam side by side like boy and girl strolling down a maple-shaded road. Behind them like the spread of a fan the others followed. A month had passed since the affair with the angler; and Old Black Bass had fully recovered. The hook wound had troubled him, but clean waters had soothed it to healing.

He was well. Never in his years had the full tide of life so pounded through him. Energy was in his muscles, clean power in the arch of his head; and he swam by Friendly with an easy confidence that suggested and dominated and triumphed.

They were going to the head of the lake. Inlet waters called them, cold stone-harried waters from the hills. For up at the inlet were the shiners, up where the current pushed them from the river nooks to the open lake.

Just how Old Black Bass and his school knew the head waters of the lake provided the best foraging spot no man may know. Perhaps a sense of direction perceived by the lateral line told them, perhaps the faint current created by the running water as it swept into the lake. But it might have been a Voice, an old Paleozoic urge that turned them to feeding-ground as the anadromous salmon is lured up the cascading river.

On they swam, past old foundations where homes had once stood, up hollows where in the lush of the olden days the cattle had browsed, around the mellowed roots of old forest trees, past great boulders. Now the water was dark, now lighted by the glimmer of the sun on the surface.

In time they approached the prime feeding-ground. But while yet afar off their sense of pressure apprised them of the

presence of other life in the vicinity. Faint shocks, vague stirrings of the water, slight wavelets on the distant surface all informed them that the proposed spot was already occupied.

They drew nearer; then saw. The pickerel were there. Long they were and pale. Where the bass were short and dark and thick, the pickerel were very light, almost white, and their bodies were long and slender. Their heads were pointed and shapely, fins of silken softness, and their movements lithe and graceful as the gestures of exquisite dancers.

As Old Black Bass led his school up to them the pickerel ceased movement. Two families of the Pisces faced each other in the quiet waters of Lone Pine. Two groups of implacable foes, for between the bass and the pickerel is ancient enmity; a great hatred that abates not, neither is forgotten. And whenever they meet is war.

But even the eye of hate may not be too blind, nor could it fail to concede a certain respect for the pale giants. They were lords. They were fighters as fierce and bold as the bass. They feared nothing save

man. Their grace and beauty masked a nature subtle as the serpent, patient as the setter, and terrible as the cougar.

It was fitting that in Old Black Bass's career he should face this ancient foe. The highest selection of his own race, a fitting survival of all the *Micropterus Salmoides* that had gone before, it was meet that he as the representative of his line should stand against this primordial contender.

Nor did the giant leader of the pickerel school seem dismayed at the prospect. He waited expectant, motionless save for gentle swaying of paired fins, lidless eyes unwavering, an antagonist that should ask no quarter and give none.

Among primitive men leaders alone fought first. Thus not the army behind him, but Goliath alone stalked forth to contend with Israel's choicest. So now Old Black Bass moved past his school and stood out solitary as the representative of his kind. And by silken movement of his tail the giant pickerel advanced a foot.

The voices of the past whispered wisdom to Old Black Bass, speaking gently as a coach calls directions to his nine. Whis-

pered the tactics of the pickerel, how he fights subtly, employing cunning, tries exhaustion as himself having measureless endurance, playing about his antagonist with lithe body till he is too wearied to resist, then closing for the slaughter.

The awareness of these voices was Old Black Bass's superior advantage. They put at his disposal the wisdom of the past. His was an organism of superior endowment, quick insight, subtle intuition, unerring judgment, gigantic strength.

So now instead of lunging recklessly and wearing himself out, after the manner of his kind, he came warily, craftily. But he advanced joyfully. This was his great chance. Here was occasion when he could place at the service of his beloved school the last full measure of his new devotion. Should each school attack the other, many would slip into the great Darkness that day and float belly-up to the shore. But should he contend and win, his kind would live. It was his opportunity to atone for the past, to make up to the school for those thoughtless years of selfishness and cruelty.

His eye ran over the great pickerel from

head to tail, taking in the long mouth filled with twin rows of sharp, cruel teeth; the pink gills vibrating gracefully in the water; the long pale body, dark at the top, lighter on the belly, streaked with faint lines of light blue; the fins small and fanning; down to the long forked tail. Old Black Bass noted all, and with a suggestion of infinite patience and cunning slowly approached.

This was unusual, as the pickerel had expected a lunge, a quick stop, and a stab at his belly by the long bayonet of the dorsal fin. But this did not happen. Old Black Bass was heeding the voices of the past, and fighting the pickerel with his own cunning. Back and to, here and there, now above, now below, driving, backing, churning, he annoyed the pickerel with a patience that was tireless. And ever was the cold look in his eye as of one biding his time.

But never had he encountered so near an equal. Twice the pointed mouth of the long fish opened and closed with snap of rage, annoyance doubling the fury of the strike. But for most part he too was patient, ominous, confident, maneuvering for position whence he might strike with decisive

consequence. He swam low, to leave no room beneath him for the bayonet thrust of dorsal.

He drew first blood. From behind he scraped forward and with needle teeth raked the vulnerable gills. One gave way and parted, hanging like a frayed line. It was a dangerous thrust. The supple body then turned and danced bewilderingly about. Triumph showed in every movement.

But Old Black Bass gave absolutely no sign. He was unconcerned, seemingly indifferent to the pain. With cold purposefulness he followed the agile monster. He backed, charged with unexpected and telling ferocity, and struck the pickerel over the air bladder. The finger-shaped lung recoiled at the impact, staggering the surprised fish.

Then both accelerated the pace. The pickerel struck like the release of a coiled spring, leaped high and descending dragged again at the vulnerable gills. For just as in fighting, one dog tries for the throat and another for the foot, so the great pickerel aimed for the most alarming spot of

all, the gills. For this reason he was the Killer, so known of his school.

But Old Black Bass kept on. Back and forth he followed the agile Killer, lidless eyes unwavering. He bore the thrusts without sign, received the blows with no diminishing of his watchfulness.

The voices had told him what to do, though he had never done it before. And he was awaiting opportunity to obey them. Sooner or later he knew the opening would come.

But it must hurry. Already two gill slits hung like frayed strings at his cheek. Already red wound clung welt-like to his side. And still the Killer charged. His movements seemed effortless, his endurance unbelievable. More than once Old Black Bass felt his nerves on the point of snapping before the ubiquitous white streak and his endless motion.

But he endured. It was the greatest fight that ever was waged or ever should be fought again. And the outcome would be of greater significance than either of the two fish dreamed. For it would answer the question among men often asked, as to

whether the bass or the pickerel shall be the dominant game fish of the American waters. This test was typical, representative of the two races, symbolical of the group struggle that in the years to come would end the dominance of one and establish the other.

Friendly saw the wounds of her mate and was distressed. She would have intervened had nature not bade otherwise. Leaper would have gone in now and thrown his unwearied spirit into the struggle, but he knew it was not so to be.

From beneath the Killer clamped his plierlike jaws about Old Black Bass's body just back of the anal, and the grip held. The big bass lashed his body furiously to break it, but the supple pickerel snapped back and to at the lashings like the cracker of a whip. But it was a body wound alone, and pierced no viscera or vital organ. He loosed his hold to snap higher up on the belly, as a dog will loose to catch deeper. But the instant the jaws slackened Old Black Bass wrenched free.

One of the pickerel's long teeth caught in the heavy skin. He was lifted high before he could free himself. And with the

Killer above him, the Voices told Old Black Bass that the time had come. He rose quicker than the eye could follow, reared and raked his sawlike dorsal down the pickerel's belly.

Small white scales like tiny flecks of crystal silvered the water. Red gash opened the pickerel's body, exposing the viscera. Water rushed into the cavity. He whirled belly-up like an overturned canoe.

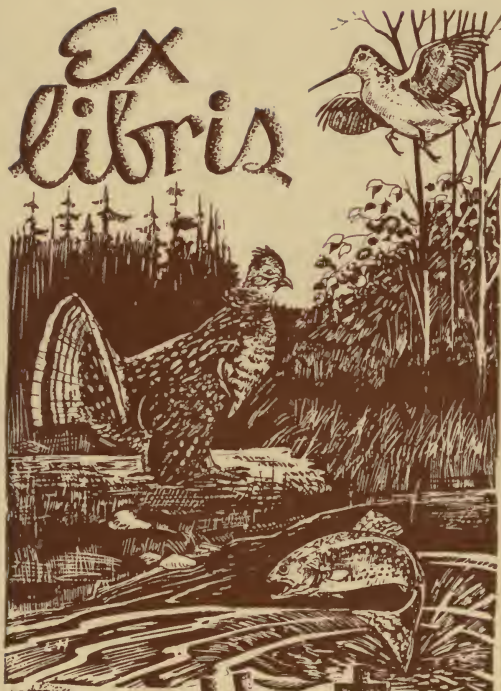
The fight was over.

For a moment the other bass of the school were motionless. They were still under the spell of the great conflict. But when Old Black Bass dropped wearily down, there was awakening: opening and closing of gills like a deep sigh; movement of relief; glances toward the great fish that conveyed sympathy and gratitude.

He was gory, scarred, and weary. But Friendly swam up to him, and like a blushing maiden leading scarred but victorious gladiator from an old Roman arena, she squared her body with his and swam proudly by his side to the deep.

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libris



Don Horter

